

How We Proceed with Fables

By Azzeddine' Bencherab and Ahmed Tahar Berrabah

According to the *Oxford dictionary*, a fable is a short tale intended to give a moral teaching through animals which are used as characters.

In EFL classes, and especially with first year learners, fables can offer an opportunity, in a relaxed atmosphere, for learners to speak and for teachers to reinforce the simple past versus the past continuous or the simple present versus the present continuous. Fables are also useful with a weak class in need of practice in narrating events in a logical sequence, and for teaching writing-one of the most difficult skills in teaching a foreign language.

Since fables are designed primarily for written and oral expression, learners benefit from supplementary materials which consist of visual support, lexical items clues and action clues.

With our first-year learners, we proceed as follows:

- We hand out papers to learners. These papers depict scenes, illustrations, actions. (The drawings do not have to be perfect; stick figures can be used instead).
- Once the pictures are handed out, we ask learners to examine them.
- We then ask them to describe the pictures one at a time. A pause is marked after each picture description. The pause aims at making learners store, memorize, and summarize what has been said. The weakest or shyest learners are given a chance to speak, even if only one word.
- We prompt learners with questions like: What do you see in picture one? How many animals do you see? Can you name them? Learners will probably not know, mistaking undoubtedly, the fox for a dog. At this level, the key characters-the fox and the crow-are introduced. By asking a series of questions, we assist learners, give them the feeling that they are not left to themselves, and, finally, help them avoid "language learning anxiety" which we know so well.
- Since we cannot expect learners to make correct, coherent sentences and find the key words by themselves, we intervene as needed to introduce the words that hamper the flow of the oral description. While students are speaking, lexical items or fragments (not whole sentences) are written on the blackboard.
- Once all the pictures have been dealt with, we ask learners to use the raw material to write a composition, which should end up with a proverb or saying.

Note: Learners' free writing could be backed up with linkers such as: but, suddenly, after that, while. We leave it up to the teacher as to whether the present tense or the past is to be used.

Variations

Visual support enables learners to acquire new vocabulary and revise lexical items that students may have forgotten.

So, to make sure that learners are really "eye witnessing" and to develop their visual perception, the teacher could give a set of jumbled words, commonly known as "word clues." Some of these words are relevant to the illustration, others are not. Learners will have to find by themselves those words that are relevant to the story, and those that are not, then reorder them as they come in the illustration. Once students have finished, this activity can be expanded to action clues. By action clues, we mean verbs; nevertheless, learners should be assisted with action clues that are difficult to picture, such as *thinking* or *wondering*.

Still, this variation is not possible when the illustrations depict simple scenes or when the pictures are more or less the same.

Conclusion

The technique described above heightens the learners' levels of observation or visual perception and strengthens both oral and written expression. The purpose of the illustration is to offer learners a visual base for practice. As Dean Curry states: Provide learners with bricks and mortar. Then the learners can begin to build.

Azzeddine' Bencherab is a high school teacher of English at Hellali Ameer High School, Saida, Algeria. He is interested in developing reading and writing skills.

Ahmed Tahar Berrabah is a high school teacher of English at Mehadji Mohamed Habib, Ain Arbaa, Algeria. He is interested in developing listening and speaking skills.

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